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By-Francis, W.N.

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In the past half century, precisely during a period when a theory of language approaching adequacy has been developing, the primary function of the schools, to increase the user's knowledge of and about language, has been neglected. As a result, the gap between the concepts about language and linguistic belief, held by otherwise educated literary men, that there is no distinction between operational skill and theoretical knowledge, has widened. However, once having accepted the responsibility of becoming once again scholars of language as well as literature, the English-teaching profession must teach students about language in the traditional sense of linguistics scholarship in an attempt to increase their power ove r the language itself. (AB)

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Language and Linguistics in the English Program

W. N. FRANCIS

I SHALL TAKE AS MY TEXT a sentence from the first paragraph of the report of the English Study Committee, as reported in *Design for Learning* (p. 21): "It is a prime function of the schools to increase the user's power over language, and provide him with keys to the treasures of knowledge, experience, and pleasure that control of language has made possible." If we couple to this admirable statement, as a sort of minor premise, the old maxim that knowledge is power, we are led to the logical conclusion that it is a prime function of the schools to increase the user's knowledge of and about language—in the senses of *nous* and *dianoia* that Mr. Frye discussed.

My contention is that at least the second part of this function has been neglected in the past half century, with the result that a generation has grown up and been educated in lamentable ignorance of the basic facts about language. Furthermore, this has happened during a period when knowledge of these facts has been greatly deepened, and when a theory of language beginning to approach adequacy has been gradually developing. As a result, the gap between the concepts about language held by specialists in this discipline and the superstitions and myths—they deserve no better name—which constitute the linguistic theory of otherwise educated men has widened. I know no respectable academic discipline in which there is such an unbridgeable chasm between the thought of specialists and the beliefs of the public, including some of its most highly educated members.

If such a gap exists as I have claimed, it represents a massive and catastrophic failure of the educational system to accomplish its aims. It is therefore incumbent on me to demonstrate that the gap exists. To do so I need only draw upon the documents, now embarrassingly plentiful, arising from the publication in 1961 of the third edition of *Webster's New International Dictionary*. This is being more than fair, since the reviewers who, in attacking this book, showed their abysmal ignorance of modern language study were not anonymous hacks but distinguished men of letters—in other fields than linguistics—like Jacques Barzun, Dwight Macdonald, Mario Pei, and Wilson Follett. Here, for example, is Mario Pei, professor of Romance philology at Columbia University, writing with the blessing of the education editor of the *Saturday Review* (July 21, 1962, pp. 45 ff.):

> . . . the followers of the American, anthropological, descriptive, structuralistic school of linguistics, a school which for decades has been preaching that one form of language is as good as another; that there is no such thing as correct or incorrect so far as native speakers of the language are concerned; that at the age of five anyone who is not deaf or idiotic has gained a full mastery of his language; that we must not try to correct or improve language, but must leave it alone; that the only language activity worthy of the name is speech on the colloquial, slangy, even illiterate plane; that writing is a secondary, unimportant activity which cannot be dignified with the name of language; that systems of writing serve only to disguise the true nature of language; and that it would be well if we completely refrained from teaching spelling for a number of years.

Here are eight specific doctrines attributed to American structural linguists.

Mr. Francis is chairman of NCTE's Commission on the English Language and professor of linguistics and English at Brown University.

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Every single one of them is wrong; I know no linguist who would subscribe to any of them, and the work of most of those I know refutes them seriatim and *in toto*.

Here is Jacques Barzun, professor of history and dean of the graduate faculties at Columbia University, writing as the mouthpiece of the editorial board of *The American Scholar*: (Spring 1963, pp. 177 ff.):

> The so-called scientific doctrine which has killed grammar and rhetoric in the schools asserts a number of incompatible things about language: that it is a system of sounds used for communication and therefore changeable at will; that it is a natural entity which grows and evolves, and therefore follows natural, not arbitrary laws. . . . It goes on to teach that the sounds of language can be given symbolic representation in written forms, thanks to which the evolution of both sounds and forms can be traced over millennia and across continents; yet the science also holds that language is speech and speech alone; hence the ways and opinions of writers have no more importance in linguistics than ideas have in Marxist materialism: both are the empty froth carried down the powerful stream of history. It follows that the English language comprises whatever is intelligible to any group that thinks it is speaking English—Puerto Rican children in New York, native bureaucrats in India or Nigeria, Ozark mountaineers, B.B.C. announcers, judges of the United States Supreme Court, and unfortunate idiots with cleft palates.

One might add "expatriate French academics" to the list. In any case, anyone who knows anything about modern linguistic scholarship knows that this is either vicious misrepresentation or arrant nonsense.

The fact that these eminent literary men made asses of themselves in accepting reviewing assignments for which they were neither competent by professional training nor willing to make up for their incompetence by working at the assigned job is an interesting reflection of the unique attitude toward language in our culture. Language is considered to be a field in which anyone who uses it competently is an expert. The distinction between operational skill and theoretical knowledge, which is carefully maintained in other disciplines, is here ignored. No one would ask an airline pilot, no matter how skillful, to review an encyclopedic work on aerodynamics. Yet none of the upper middlebrow magazines in this country thought of asking an expert on the English language to review the dictionary. The British were more reasonable. They did turn to linguistic scholars, and the result was that the book got fair and on the whole highly favorable reviews in Great Britain.

I have called this situation evidence of a massive and catastrophic failure of the schools to inform the ordinary citizen about language. I don't think this is an exaggeration. Not only educated persons like the reviewers, but the ordinary citizen as well has strange notions about the language he uses every day. He will not believe, for instance, that it is *his* language; that he and his millions of counterparts in the past are the inventors and molders of language, in spite of the efforts of the learned and the socially superior to twist it in other directions. Instead he accepts the myth of some alien transcendental authority whose business it is to legislate linguistic truths and shame the likes of him by calling attention to his deviations from their authority. The persistence of this myth is sufficient evidence of the failure of our educational system to disseminate light and truth in this important area.

Please do not misunderstand me; I am not intending to suggest that *Webster 3* is an impeccable or unassailable book. It isn't. Linguists like Sledd and Weinreich have pointed out its shortcomings. My point is that the public discussion has been carried out on grounds irrelevant

to the discipline of linguistics and in ways that specialists in that discipline could not effectively counter because the arguments brought up were not linguistic arguments at all. Linguists like Sledd and Dykema who brought the illumination of their discipline and scholarly knowledge to bear on the controversy found themselves frustrated by the unwillingness of their opponents to meet them on the cold and clean plateau of rationality where scholarly argument and discussion rightly take place. Instead they found themselves mired in a swamp of prejudice and unreason, like Browning's Childe Roland before the Dark Tower. But the fact that the rustic with a club can beat down the fencer with a rapier does not qualify the club-wielder as the better man in virtue or in skill. Instead it marks one more defeat for skill, knowledge, and the civilized way of doing things. The irony in this case is that the club-wielders saw themselves as the defenders of language itself, the indispensable tool of civilization, against the barbarians who would destroy it. Further irony attends the fact that the most prejudiced of these attacks was given space and backing in a journal named after the most eloquent plea for rational and independent judgment in our national literature, *The American Scholar*. Look here upon this picture, and on this. Emerson: "The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances. He plies the slow, unhonored, and unpaid task of observation." Barzun: "I was delegated to express the board's 'position.' This was extraordinary. . . . What is even more remarkable, none of those present had given the new dictionary more than a casual glance, yet each one felt that he knew how he stood on the issue that the work presented to the public" (loc. cit., p. 176).

Truly the great apostle of self-reliance, of Man Thinking, would be appalled that those who profess to carry on his tradition in the name of one of his greatest addresses and under the sponsorship of the scholarly organization to whom it was addressed could cheerfully admit to making up their minds to condemn a complex work of high scholarship on the basis of a casual glance, and could delegate the task of expressing their unreasoned prejudice to one who reveals himself as the antithesis of everything Emerson calls for in his ringing challenge. The fact that such a thing could happen, I repeat, is evidence of a massive and catastrophic failure of the schools.

Since teaching about language falls most naturally within the province of the English teacher, this failure is to be laid at his door. He has forgotten Emerson's precept that "Each age . . . must write its own books." He has closed his mind to the new and erected his authority on the already second- or third-hand authority of his own teachers. It is no wonder that his students have adopted the same policy at one further remove. It is amusing to see how precisely Emerson's words fit the eminent newspaper and magazine editors who solemnly proclaimed their continued allegiance to the outdated *Webster 2:*

> The sluggish and perverted mind of the multitude, slow to open to the incursions of Reason, having once so opened, having once received this book, stands upon it, and makes an outcry if it is disparaged. Colleges are built on it. Books are written on it by thinkers, not by Man Thinking; by men of talent, that is, who start wrong, who set out from accepted dogmas, not from their own sight of principles.

Messrs. Barzun & Co. are men of talent, even, perhaps, thinkers, but when they venture into this field they are not Man Thinking.

My point is, then, that teaching about language in the light of the latest, the most compendious, and the most profound thinking on the subject is a paramount duty of the English-teaching profession for the loftiest of reasons. The piddling debates in the school journals

about whether something called "the linguistic approach" will be more effective in curing the solecisms of semiliterate student writing than will something called "traditional grammar" are meaningless because they simply want to supplant one authoritarian doctrine with another. In our study of language and our teaching of it we must take the high ground of scholarship that Emerson pointed out a century and a quarter ago:

> In silence, in steadiness, in severe abstraction, let [the scholar] hold by himself; let him add observation to observation, patient of neglect, patient of reproach, and bide his own time,—happy enough if he can satisfy himself alone that this day he has seen something truly. Success treads on every right step. For the instinct is sure, that prompts him to tell his brother what he thinks.

It is in this tradition—which, I submit, more accurately describes the attitude of Dr. Johnson and Dr. Gove than that of Professor Barzun—that our scholarly attitudes toward language must be formed. Our teaching, like all honest teaching, must in turn be guided by our scholarship. It is not enough: it is dishonest: or in Emerson's more powerful word it is *noxious* to pass on dogmas and mechanically learned shibboleths to our students and to decry the work of good minds and honest scholars as subversive novelty-mongering. The world of linguistic scholarship today is a complex, varied, and often controversial one. Too often the English teacher grasps at this as an excuse for not bothering with it at all. But, as Emerson pointed out, this timidity is not the way of the scholar—"It is a shame to him . . . if he seek a temporary peace by the diversion of his thoughts from . . . vexed questions, hiding his head like an ostrich in the flowering bushes." If he is not willing to venture into the exciting world of scholarly discussion and controversy about language, and to communicate some of its excitement to his students, let him cease to teach about language at all, and delegate this one of his functions to the linguist or the anthropologist. I for one, who have been an English teacher for twenty-five years, would deplore this as an abdication of his responsibility, for language is at the heart and core of our subject and our discipline. Instead let the English teacher accept the duty of becoming a scholar in language as he is in literature. Only so, I believe, can he discharge the prime function of his calling, and here I return to the language of my text: to increase his students' power over language, and provide them with keys to the treasures of knowledge, experience, and pleasure that control of language has made possible.

The love of turgid expressions is gaining ground, and ought to be corrected. One of the most certain evidences of a man of high breeding, is his simplicity of speech; a simplicity that is equally removed from vulgarity and exaggeration. He calls a spade, a "spade." His enunciation, while clear, deliberate and dignified, is totally without strut, showing his familiarity with the world, and, in some degree, reflecting the qualities of his mind, which is polished without being addicted to sentimentalism, or any other bloated feeling.

James Fenimore Cooper

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